

Message Text

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PAGE 01 LONDON 05153 01 OF 02 031543Z POSS DUPE
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TAGS: PINT, PGOV, UK
SUBJECT: COMMITTEE REPORT MAY DEFUSE IMMIGRATION ISSUE

REF: LONDON 3940

SUMMARY: THE REPORT OF THE COMMONS SELECT COMMITTEE
ON RACE RELATIONS AND IMMIGRATION, WHICH UNANIMOUSLY
RECOMMENDED ESTABLISHMENT OF AN OVERALL QUOTA FOR
INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT IMMIGRATION AND STEPS TO TIGHTEN
CURRENT IMMIGRATION POLICIES AND PRACTICES, IF ACCEPTED
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PAGE 02 LONDON 05153 01 OF 02 031543Z POSS DUPE

IN LARGE PART BY THE GOVERNMENT, WILL PROBABLY ELIMINAT
IMMIGRATION AS A MAJOR POLITICAL ISSUE IN THE NEXT
GENERAL ELECTION. ALTHOUGH SOME OF THE COMMITTEE'S
RECOMMENDATIONS MIGHT REDUCE THE CURRENT LEVEL OF IMMI-
GRATION, THEY WOULD NOT NECESSARILY REPUDIATE HMG'S
EXISTING COMMITMENTS. AND FROM CALLAGHAN'S VIEWPOINT,
THEIR IMPLEMENTATION COULD DEFUSE WHAT APPEARS TO BE

A POTENTIALLY DAMAGING POLITICAL ISSUE. END SUMMARY.

1. THE HOUSE OF COMMONS SELECT COMMITTEE ON RACE RELATIONS AND IMMIGRATION, COMPOSED OF FIVE CONSERVATIVE AND FIVE LABOR MPS, MARCH 13 ISSUED ITS FIRST REPORT WHICH CONTAINED NINE GENERAL AND 20 SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS CONCERNING THE OPERATION OF THE 1976 IMMIGRATION ACT AND THE INFLOW OF COMMONWEALTH CITIZENS AND OTHER FOREIGN NATIONALS. THE REPORT AND ITS RECOMMENDATIONS WERE UNANIMOUS. IT IS ALSO WORTHY OF NOTE THAT THE MAKE-UP OF THE COMMITTEE WAS BALANCED TO INCLUDE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PRINCIPAL FACTIONS IN BOTH THE MAJOR PARTIES.

2. ALTHOUGH MANY OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS WERE ANODYNE OR CONCERNED PROCEDURAL MATTERS. THE COMMITTEE DID BREAK NEW GROUND IN URGING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ANNUAL "OVERALL FIGURE FOR THE ADMISSION OF IMMIGRANTS FROM THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT". OTHER SIGNIFICANT RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDED THE FOLLOWING:

-- THAT THERE SHOULD BE "NO FURTHER PRIMARY IMMIGRATION FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, SUBJECT ONLY TO THE PROVISIONS OF THE 1971 IMMIGRATION ACT (WHICH ESTABLISHED A SPECIFIC COMMITMENT TO BRITISH PASSPORT HOLDERS IN FORMER COLONIES AND CERTAIN INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT IMMIGRANTS) AND CURRENT EC OBLIGATIONS;
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PAGE 03 LONDON 05153 01 OF 02 031543Z POSS DUPE

-- THAT, FOLLOWING CONSULTATIONS WITH CONCERNED GOVERNMENTS. HMG SHOULD DETERMINE THE DATE AFTER WHICH "SPECIAL VOUCHERS" FOR IMMIGRATION WOULD NOT BE ISSUED:
-- THAT SUBSTANTIALLY MORE RESOURCES BE ALLOCATED TO ENABLE ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES TO TRACE OVERSTAYERS AND OTHER ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS;
-- THAT LEGISLATION BE ENACTED TO IMPOSE SANCTIONS AGAINST EMPLOYERS WHO KNOWINGLY EMPLOY OVERSTAYERS AND ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS; AND
-- THAT DISCUSSIONS BE HELD WITH THE GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND TO FIND WAYS TO CONTROL THE IMMIGRATION OF OTHER THAN UK AND IRISH CITIZENS FROM IRELAND.

3. REACTION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT HAS BEEN MIXED, WITH BACKBENCHERS OF BOTH PARTIES CRITICIZING SOME ASPECTS OF IT, PARTICULARLY ITS USE OF "RESTRICTIONIST" LANGUAGE. THE LOUDEST NOISE, PREDICTABLY, HAS COME FROM THOSE IN THE FOREFRONT OF VARIOUS ANTI-RACIST ORGANIZATIONS. PERHAPS THE MOST TELLING CRITICISM, HOWEVER, CAME FROM FORMER HOME MINISTER AND RACE RELATIONS ACTIVIST ALEX LYON, MP (LABOR), WHO ASSERTED THAT THE COMMITTEE HAD CHOSEN TO OBSCURE THE "SENSIBLE

CORE OF ITS RECOMMENDATIONS" IN LANGUAGE THAT APPEALED TO THOSE WHO FELT THREATENED BY IMMIGRATION. GOVERNMENT SPOKESMEN -- COMMONS LEADER FOOT AND HOME SECRETARY REES -- BOTH NOTED THAT SOME OF THE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS COULD INFRINGE ON TRADITIONAL CIVIL LIBERTIES AND INDICATED THE GOVERNMENT WOULD MOVE VERY CAREFULLY IN THAT AREA. CONSERVATIVE SOURCES HAVE

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PAGE 01 LONDON 05153 02 OF 02 031543Z POSS DUPE
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 05153

REPORTEDLY EXPRESSED DOUBTS THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD ACCEPT THE RECOMMENDED ESTABLISHMENT OF A QUOTA FOR INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT IMMIGRANTS.

4. COMMENT: BRITISH GOVERNMENTS HAVE HERETOFORE RESISTED EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH FIXED QUOTAS FOR IMMI-

GRANTS FROM THE INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT OR ELSEWHERE.
THE RECOMMENDATION TO DO SO IS CLEARLY THE MOST CONTRO-
VERSIAL OF THOSE MADE BY THE COMMITTEE. WHILE THE KEY
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PAGE 02 LONDON 05153 02 OF 02 031543Z POSS DUPE

QUESTION IS THE SIZE OF THE ANNUAL QUOTA, MANY PEOPLE
ARE OPPOSED TO THE QUOTA PRINCIPLE. CALLAGHAN, HOWEVER,
HAD EARLIER STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS COMMITTEE

SPOKESMEN AFFIRMED THAT ITS RECOMMENDATIONS WOULD BE
STUDIED CAREFULLY, ALBEIT WITH CAVEATS. THE FACT THAT
THE REPORT WAS UNANIMOUS -- COMMITTEE MEMBERS REPORTEDLY
WORKED LONG AND HARD TO ENSURE A CONSENSUS AND TO AVOID
DIVISIONS ALONG PARTISAN LINES -- AND THE LIKELIHOOD
THAT IMMIGRATION COULD BECOME AN EMOTIONAL POLITICAL
ISSUE IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION MAKE THE REPORT
IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE AND DIFFICULT TO REJECT. THE
RECOMMENDATIONS, MOREOVER, WOULD SEEM TO GO SOME WAY
TOWARD SATISFYING MRS. THATCHER'S CRITICISMS OF CURRENT
IMMIGRATION POLICY AND PRACTICE.

5. FROM CALLAGHAN'S STANDPOINT, ACCEPTANCE OF THE
PRINCIPAL RECOMMENDATIONS WOULD SEEM TO HAVE THE ADVAN-
TAGE OF SHARPLY REDUCING THE POSSIBILITY OF IMMIGRATION
BECOMING A CUTTING ISSUE IN THE EXPECTED FALL 1978
ELECTION. WHILE THE LABOR AND CONSERVATIVE VOICES MIGH
STILL DISAGREE ON THE SUB-CONTINENT QUOTA, ACCEPTANCE O
MUCH OF THE REPORT WOULD SHARPLY NARROW THE AREA OF
POTENTIAL DISPUTE, AND CALLAGHAN COULD PROBABLY AVOID
ENTERING THE QUOTA THICKET PRIOR TO THE ELECTION.
AND SINCE ALL FACTIONS OF THE LABOR PARTY WERE REPRESEN-
TED ON THE COMMITTEE, IT WOULD BE DIFFICULT FOR LABOR'S
LEFT TO ATTACK THE GOVERNMENT FOR ADOPTING MORE RESTRIC-
TIVE IMMIGRATION POLICIES. ALTHOUGH THE LIBERALS -- WHO
WERE NOT REPRESENTED ON THE COMMITTEE -- IMMIGRANT
GROUPS AND INDIVIDUAL BACKBENCHERS FROM BOTH MAJOR
PARTIES MAY CRITICIZE THE REPORT, SUCH ATTACKS ARE
UNLIKELY TO PICK UP MUCH RESONANCE AMONG THE PUBLIC.
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PAGE 03 LONDON 05153 02 OF 02 031543Z POSS DUPE

ACCORDINGLY, IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL
SUBMIT THE REPORT TO COMMONS ON A "TAKE NOTE" MOTION
AND SUBSEQUENTLY IMPLEMENT MOST OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS.
THERE WILL PROBABLY BE NO ANNOUNCEMENT OF ITS IMPLEMEN-
TING ACTIONS, AT LEAST NOT UNTIL JUST BEFORE THE SUMMER
RECESS. AND CALLAGHAN CAN BE EXPECTED TO AVOID SPECI-

FICS ON THE MORE CONTROVERSIAL QUESTIONS. WITH LUCK
THIS WILL BE ENOUGH TO DEPOLITICIZE EFFECTIVELY THE
IMMIGRATION ISSUE, AND THAT WOULD BE A GOOD THING IN
TERMS OF SOCIAL STRESS, AS WELL AS CALLAGHAN'S
POLITICAL ASPIRATIONS.

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